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RESEARCH

Touch Me/Don't Touch Me: Representations of Female Archetypes in Ann Nocenti's *Daredevil*

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In the late 1980s, Ann Nocenti became the principle writer on the Marvel comic book, *Daredevil*, the second woman to be lead creator on the book and the first to write a significant run on an ongoing basis. Nocenti integrated themes relating to social justice, violence and the treatment of children into the narrative. She also shone the spotlight on the supporting female cast members in a way that was original and refreshing. In this article, Nocenti's challenging of feminine archetypes, such as the housewife, the temptress and the Barbie Doll, reflects ideas of mutable identities, promoted by second-wave feminism. Examining her writing of Karen Page, Typhoid Mary, Brandy Ash and Number Nine, this article argues that, despite the comic centring around a male superhero and with a predominantly male readership, Nocenti succeeds in introducing a more nuanced picture of women and pre-empting some of the changes in the promotion of female characters now apparent in the industry.

Keywords: Ann Nocenti; archetypes; *Daredevil*; female characters; second-wave feminism


Introduction

Comics are great because they're all things. Sometimes just plain fun, sometimes they have deadly intent. Anything goes (Ann Nocenti, interviewed by Mithra 1998)

Creativity in comics is not only represented by the skilful marriage of writing and art. The medium is often at its best when exploring grand theories and themes and translating these to what is often a largely younger audience. Comics can challenge power and raise social concerns, giving space for ambiguity thanks to how the combination

of words and pictures can contrast, for example, inner thoughts with external actions (McAllister et al. 2001).

Since the 1970s, as comics reflect social change, the medium has increasingly, though tentatively, embraced feminist thought and ideas (Gibson 2015). However, attempts to integrate second-wave feminist thought in Marvel comics in the 1970s has been criticised as being diluted by 'good-faith attempts by sympathetic male authors' (Heifer 2018: np) and missing the mark (Jorgensen and Lechan 2013). Whilst male writers took on female heroes as protagonists, their narratives have been criticised as being shaped according to men's experiences and disregarding feminist hopes (Magoulick 2006). By contrast, a female writer taking on a male protagonist in a mainstream comic book was rare to spot. One individual bucking this trend in the 1980s was Ann Nocenti, writer on the long running Marvel comic book, *Daredevil*, in the late 1980s/early 1990s. This article will examine how Nocenti's writing coincided with the twilight of second-wave feminism and how four female characters, Karen Page, Typhoid Mary, Brandy Ashe and Number Nine, challenge the constraints of archetypes.

A note before proceeding. The author is conscious that he is viewing a woman's writing through the lens of male privilege. This may result in a perception of male authority giving 'authenticity' to the female writer, and g potentially undermining the ability of the original creator's power and agency within the original material (Lange 2008). Whilst this is a valid limitation of the piece, the article argues for Nocenti's agency in how she has developed her characters and narratives throughout and establishes that her authorial voice is not lost or diminished.

Superheroes and Jungian Archetypes

Carl Jung defined archetypes as comprising the innate tendencies of dominant characters within myths and legends, and across a diversity of cultures. These were often male and typified in variables such as the god, the wise man, the father and the trickster. Jung saw archetype identities as unfathomable, emerging from an unknowable place (Jacobi 1959). Archetypal behaviour drives individuals at subconscious levels and so these characteristics were perceived as being innate and immutable.

One of the most famous of Jung's archetypes, present in comic books since its earliest days, was the hero, who embodied the hopes, dreams and fears of the culture he represents (Indick 2004). Perhaps the best example of this in Marvel comics, is Captain America, the Sentinel of Liberty. One of Marvel's oldest superheroes, back when the company was called Timely Comics, Captain America is reminiscent of an idealised figure, a reliable and upright character (Rubin 2012; Robinson 2004), representing Good in the fight against malice, injustice and subversion in his home country. As such, he reflects Umberto Eco's description of the comic book hero as being 'immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable' (cited by Matsuuchi 2012, 121).

These kinds of emblematic, idealised characters are redolent in ongoing comic books, where the hero is presented in not just one story, but a catalogue of tales that weave in and out of one another, often for years. Herein, multiple writers establish as continuity a mythology that revolves around a central heroic God of that comic's universe. This hero may experience some change over times but he is at root immutable. A creator may tinker with certain aspects of the status quo but key aspects are largely maintained throughout each author's run. For example, in *Daredevil*, who first appeared in 1964, characteristics such as his alias Matt Murdock's sightlessness, his employment as a lawyer, his fractured psyche and troubled faith, and even his friendship with his legal partner, Foggy Nelson, may be considered non-negotiables in terms of what essentialises this hero.

However, Marvel creators were already challenging archetypal roles from the 1960s onwards. At this point, Stan Lee's dictat that heroes have feet of clay was an explicit clarion call reconfiguring the flawless Hero into a more mutable identity which mirrored relatable flawed aspects of readers' lives, such as having self-doubt and dealing with the outcome of poor choices (Rubin 2012). Powers now were 'mutations' and could be troublesome as well as imbuelements of heroism (Robinson 2004) and heroes were increasingly engaging with and troubled by the real world, challenging social mores and representations of characters (Rubin 2012; Robinson 2004).

Challenging Archetypes: Second-wave Feminism and Comics

The emergence of second wave feminism broadly coincided with the rise of Marvel comics in the 1960s. This wave critiqued existing functionalist concerns about women's isolating roles in nuclear families and private spaces, particularly the non-identity of the housewife, challenged existing notions of power and promoted better developed female characters in popular culture (Bisignani 2015; Budgeon 2011; Genz and Brabon 2018). In the *Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir (1953) argued that women were othered, constrained by patriarchal views that determined their value by nature of their physical beauty and ability to nurture. She accused society of enforcing women to take on these feminine aspects due to cultural constraints and to fulfil socially constructed roles. By contrast, ways in which women expressed their intellect or engaged in freedom outside of these confines were either ignored or undermined (Lovell 2000). This was echoed in comics and other literature, where women were constrained by supporting roles and in thrall to the domineering Jungian male hero.

In Western cultures, archetypes were seen to represent patriarchal ideas and values, where 'public worth is measured according to a masculine standard' (Wehr 1988: 16) and women classified as an interior identity in contrast to man as 'the universal norm' (Luce Irigaray, cited by Lennon 2014: np), in ways considered inappropriate or grossly misleading (Knudsen 1969). Women were 'pale reflections of the normative masculine' (Irigaray cited by Lovell 2000: 301). This was exhibited in the golden age of superhero comics of the 1940s and 1950s, where phallogentric narratives dominated: female characters existed so that the hero could rescue them (Robbins 2009). As superhero comics continued, female characters became pigeonholed into domesticated, virginal, romantic or transgressive archetypes (Race 2013; Mains et al. 2009), where they were dominated or acquired (Murray 2011), lacked force or strength (Robbins 1996, cited by Jorgenson & Lechan 2013) and experienced objectification or victimisation (McDaniel 2009).

Female characters were particularly vulnerable to these stereotypes as superhero comics' dominant audience in the last half of the 20th century was male. Female readership may have risen in the 21st century (Alverson 2017; Orme 2016), however, three

surveys in the 1990s point to comic book readership being over 90% male at that time (Scott 2013; also Lavin 1998). It is not then surprising that the comics environment has been regarded as being hostile and confrontational towards women (Scott 2013, citing blogger, Laura Sneddon) with comics' depiction of women regarded as oppressive and regressive (Roberts & McDaniel 2016). Women in superhero comics often walked a strained tightrope between being role models for a female audience and objects of desire for their male readership (Lavin 1998).

Within this context, feminist and sociological theory began to challenge ideas around fixed Jungian archetypes intimating they are reliant upon the experience of developing cultures, the social constructions of time, location and values (Gray 2018), and were not universal (Wehr 1988). Male superheroes may be appropriated from and reflect mythological tropes but female superheroes and characters, due to their being less likely to represent these long held heroic cultural archetypes, have the capacity to be more flexible, often allowing a dialogue about gender and power relations within oppressive patriarchal cultures and traditions (Frankel 2017; Robinson 2004). It is in Ann Nocenti's work, in a comic with a male protagonist, that a more inclusive approach to a diversity of female characters, reflective of feminist concerns and agency, is observed.

Ann Nocenti was born in 1957 and studied at the State University of New York before joining Marvel as an Assistant Editor in mid 1980s. This occurred after she answered a vague ad in the Village Voice for an anonymous publishing company with no idea what the company actually did until she turned up for interview (Mithra 1998). Whilst Marvel employed a few female writers at the time, women were more likely to work in editorial roles (Lavin 1998). However, Nocenti herself recalls that there were strong female voices working for Marvel at the time and that she always felt encouraged by her fellow male editors (Campbell 2013). Nocenti never really read comics growing up (Keller 2007) and so came to the medium fresh and arguably without baggage regarding the history and minutiae of comic book characters. With *Daredevil*, she felt lucky that she had the support of a sympathetic editor, Ralph Macchio, who had no problem with her integrating themes such as social justice, feminism, the neglect of children and magic realism to her *Daredevil* run (Knight 2017; Mithra 1998). Nocenti wrote over 50 issues of *Daredevil* between 1986 and 1991.

Outside of comics, Nocenti has had a remarkable career outside comics as both a film-maker and educator, working with minority ethnic groups and at-risk young people in various parts of the world, including New York, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Haiti (Nocenti 2018). More recently, she has returned to comic book writing.

Karen Page: Critiquing Domesticity

In the old days, a lot of females [in comics] were like the secretaries, the wives, the girl that needed rescuing. (Nocenti, interviewed by Chapman 2018)

Before Nocenti's run, ongoing female characters in the book mainly fulfilled the role of potential love interest for Matt (Karen Page, Black Widow, Elektra, Heather Glenn, Candace Nelson) or, in one case, Foggy Nelson (Deborah Harris). When Nocenti became the lead writer on the book, she already had to address the return of one significant female character, Karen, to Matt Murdock's life. Outside of this, she largely concentrated on developing her own range of new female subjects. Within the four characters explored below, she both critiques archetypal ideas of domesticity and transgression in female supporting characters, freeing her writing to then introduce subjects who achieve greater agency and freedom.

Karen's return to *Daredevil* occurs at a point where she is experiencing an ongoing recovery from heroin addiction, first introduced in Frank Miller's 'Born Again' storyline. In Karen's first appearance, Nocenti presents her as a fragile blonde princess, literally gathered up in Matt's arms, whilst a bystander remarks, 'I thought people only did that in the movies' (*Daredevil* 239, see **Figure 1**). There is a deliberate artificiality to the softly lit scene, an echo of the 'paperback romance': the woman who is loved by the strong man, who will hold and protect her.

Immediately Nocenti plays with the dynamic of *Daredevil* as the hero or knight in shining armour, with Karen the frail, rescued damsel. Karen's need for recovery amplifies her reliance on Matt; she is locked into the dual roles of victim and girlfriend. In these initial episodes, Nocenti presents Karen, at least partially due to her overcoming narcotic addiction, as an archetypal trapped housewife, experiencing Betty Friedan's problem that has no name (David 2016), relegated to essentialist gender roles centred around domestic duties (Romero 2018). Her life revolves around her apartment, too scared to go out and succumb to potential temptation.

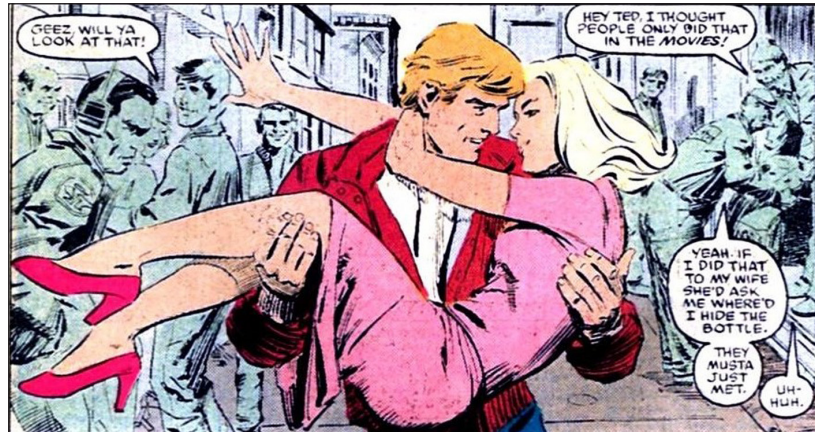


Figure 1: Nocenti, A. (w), Williams, L. (a) and Isherwood, G. (i). Bad Plumbing. *Daredevil* #239. New York: Cadence Industries Corporation © Marvel Comics Group, 1986.

Oakley (1974) associated the housewife role as being one burdened by monotony, loneliness, compromised autonomy and dissatisfaction, and Karen's experience infers this. In one remarkable scene, Nocenti shows Karen washing Matt's costume and hanging it out to dry. Not only is Karen the housewife but fulfils the archetype of the 'Good Mother' (Berkowitz 2005: 608), where she is both nurturing and self-sacrificing. As Miller (1986) notes, 'Heroines are not heroes.... If a woman loves a hero that is more likely to make her a wife or a mistress than a heroine' (135). Given Karen's status as a character who has been in the comic since 1964, it is perhaps appropriate that Nocenti presents her as someone who pre-dates second wave feminism's battles for equality and locked into a position of victimhood (Budgeon 2011).

As the storyline progresses, Nocenti explores the ambivalence in Karen's relationship with a man who is also a violent vigilante. In the 'Don't Touch Me'/'Touch Me' storylines in *Daredevil* 243/244, Karen not only expresses disgust at what Matt's hands do but also is enthralled by their capacity to look after her.

Karen: *Get off me! I hate violence. You're Daredevil. You hit people for real!... In those red gloves – your hands are just fists!* (*Daredevil* 243: 13, panel 1)

Karen: *Touch me. Your violence saved us all tonight. You are what you are, and whatever that is – I love it.... Hold me.* (*Daredevil* 244: 23, panel 3)

Using violence to achieve justice is a trope of the male superhero, whilst heroines are more likely to desire to make the world a better place (Madrid 2016). In order to resolve this dissonance and build on the nurturing characteristics of the mother, Nocenti has Karen encourage Matt to develop a free law clinic in Hell's Kitchen as an alternative to his vigilantism. This both gives Matt legitimacy but also gives Karen a role and purpose that allows her acceptance in society (Whitehead et al. 2013), albeit in a way that is always dependent upon her relationship with Matt. This vicarious dilemma experienced by women like Karen is echoed by Sheila Rowbotham: 'If the housewife wants to "improve" herself, she has in fact to "improve" the situation of her husband' (1972: 21). Karen's need to be looked after by the strong man and achieve value only in relation to Matt's own success and achievement is recognised by Demaris Wehr:

[C]apturing a man is felt to compensate for women's lack of recognition and worth in themselves. By association with a man who has status [and] recognition [...] a woman may unconsciously be trying to acquire those qualities. (1988: 106–107)

If Matt is not a 'good man', as Nocenti has been inferring through his casual use of violence, Karen is at great risk of becoming trapped and used. Nocenti then further exposes the fragility of this relationship through the introduction to Mary Walker, who instigates Matt into an affair. Karen may have been holding up her end of the functionalist bargain but Matt, who, by the very nature of male privilege, holds greater power in the relationship, does not. In Karen's final scene of Nocenti's run, she is dashing away from the hospital where Matt, who has been admitted following a supervillain pummelling, has called out for Mary and not her. Nocenti is making a tragic commentary on the domesticated oppression of women that may be experienced in these relationship structures.

Mary Walker/Typhoid Mary: Critiquing Transgression

I was just sick of how females in comics were either goody girls or witches and wanted to shatter the female thing by making her all types rolled into one.
(Nocenti, interviewed by Keller 2007)

If Karen's character resonates with the limitations experienced by female characters birthed in the 1960s, by contrast, Nocenti presents Typhoid Mary explicitly as a direct challenge to the woman locked into the functionalist roles that enchain Karen. With her new creation, Nocenti explores ideas of role reversal and subversion, conveyed deliberately through a dichotomy. This is literal as Mary is both the villainous Typhoid and her counterpoint, the seemingly innocent Mary Walker.

Nocenti introduces Mary Walker as 'fragile' and a 'sweet, compassionate girl... oblivious... to her other half [Typhoid]'. There is also 'much known about her' in contrast to Typhoid, of whom 'nothing' is known (all citations from *Daredevil* 254). Nocenti is highlighting Mary Walker's familiarity as an archetypal fictional sweetheart, whilst Typhoid is something new, threatening and challenging. Later Matt, wavering between Karen and an infatuation with Mary, states:

Matt: *Oh, darling, you are like a child.... You are so vulnerable and sad... so fragile... it just breaks my heart.* (*Daredevil* 259: 3, panel 5)

Mary's seduction of Matt appeals to archetypal notions, familiar in fairy tales and already demonstrated in an early scene with Karen, of the male hero as rescuer and protector (O'Connor 1989). By contrast, *Daredevil*'s engagement with Typhoid leads to very different thoughts:

Daredevil: *I hate her.... So sick, so hot, she's disgusting. But I'll get her.*
(*Daredevil* 255: 25, panel 3)

Nocenti writes Mary as meeting idealised notions of submissive womanhood, but the 'unknowable' Typhoid threatens Matt's gender identity and roles of hero and protector. Typhoid represents 'the phallic girl', assuming characteristics redolent of male power and being the instigator of aggressive and transgressive behaviour (McRobbie 2007: 732). She is an 'alpha female' (Ward et al. 2010: 309), exhibiting leadership qualities, drive, extroversion and a sense of superiority over others. In her earliest scene, Nocenti presents an accomplice, Rip, as confounded by Typhoid's effortless role reversal:

Rip: *You treat me like you're a man and I'm some girl.* (*Daredevil* 254: 6, panel 2)

Typhoid is strong, independent, fiery and unknown whilst Mary is compliant to males and the values of 20th century functionalism. Yet Nocenti makes clear that it is Typhoid who is the character's true identity and Mary the mask, rather than the other way round. Mary Walker's survival within this context is dependent upon her being able to successfully contain herself within the notion of needing rescued. As such, she adopts a functionalist role performance appropriate to her sex (Whitehead et al. 2013), whilst Typhoid's imbuelement of supposedly male characteristics allows her transcendence. Typhoid's actions both appal her male antagonists and liberate her. As her storyline with Daredevil concludes in issue 260, she triumphantly conducts the hero's emasculation, dropping Daredevil from a bridge to his supposed death.

Brandy Ash: Building Agency

Whilst in Typhoid Mary, Nocenti weaves a dichotomous character in one body, the next two significant female characters represent dichotomies in their personae and very different outlooks.

Nocenti explicitly identifies Brandy Ash early on as a feminist with a social conscience. Daredevil, who has survived his battle with Typhoid and escaped from Hell's Kitchen, first encounters Brandy in a rural location, where she ruminates on the ambivalence she feels at gaining some privilege from her father, Skip, who both owns a genetic farm and operates as a drugs supplier in New York, and whose actions also disgust her:

Brandy: *I hate him! Yes, I can spend your money!... I'll show you tonight! I'll spend your money to undo some of the damage you do making it!*
(*Daredevil* 271: 6, panels 1, 2 and 4)

Nocenti presents Brandy both as a free thinker and also as being still in thrall to a patriarchal, capitalist society. In order to free herself from this, she plans to blow up her father's genetic pig farm, an act which echoes the militant actions of Suffragettes (Bearman 2005). Whilst Typhoid may be the phallic girl and exude power in a way

that seems to echo male behaviour, Brandy is the 'Just Warrior' (Berkowitz 2005: 609), an individual who is less reliant on sexuality and beauty but instead on intelligence, inner toughness and defiance, and who wishes to overthrow corrupt elements of the dominant society which constrains her.

Nocenti also uses Brandy to critique the male superhero and his lack of awareness on the consequences of his actions, an important theme in Nocenti's run (Long 2016). Usually feminist concerns have been articulated through female superheroes (Robinson 2004) and the themes being developed here cause the male hero dissonance. On a number of occasions, Daredevil ruminates on why he is staying with Brandy and her companion, Number Nine. Nocenti indicates that the male hero is confused about his role in this friendship with a strong woman, where his own purposes appear to be subservient to two women who have inveigled their ways into his own comic.

Brandy: *Hey, why are you packing your knapsack?*

Daredevil: *Time to move on, you ladies will be fine. I'm sure you can teach each other a lot.* (Daredevil 272: 15, panel 5)

Brandy: *Well, then, Daredevil, everyone's safe. I guess you're free to cut out if you want.* (Daredevil 275: 18, panel 4 see **Figure 2**)

Daredevil: *Why am I up here in the attic?... Because I want to be alone. I want to escape, to get away from the spiralling problems of all these people I don't know... If I left wouldn't all these problems be worked out without me? What good can I do here?* (Daredevil 275: 6, panels 3 and 4; 8, panel 5)

Daredevil's desire to disappear reflects the purpose of an archetype, identified in the title of Marvel's collected edition of these stories, the Lone Stranger, a melancholic, distant loner perhaps best exemplified in American popular culture by actors like Clint Eastwood (Modleski 2010). Brandy, however, is quick to point out this role's insufficiencies and appeals to altruism and empathy.

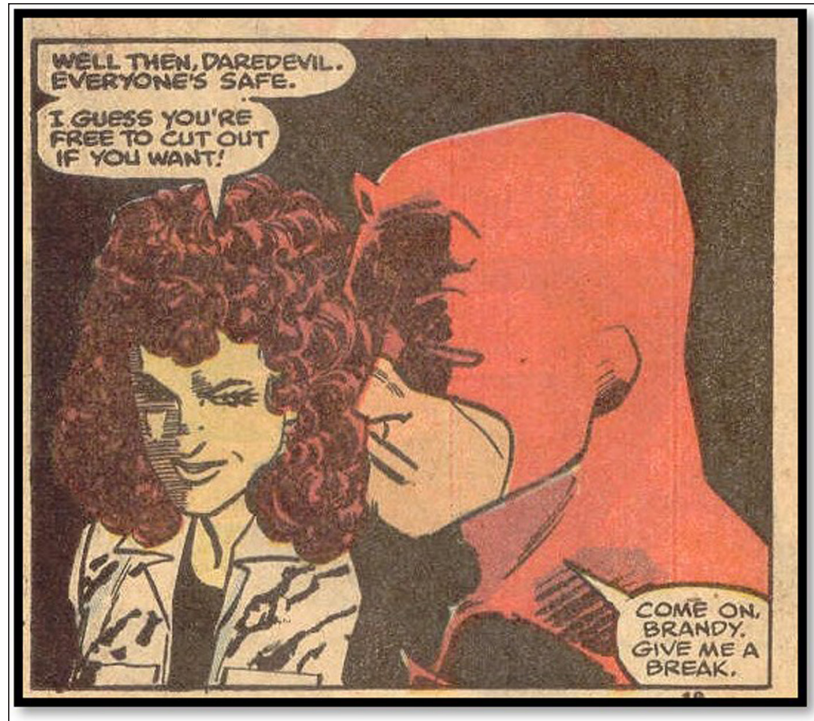


Figure 2: Nocenti, A. (w), Romita Jr., J. (a) and Williamson, A. (i). False Man. *Daredevil* #275. New York. © Marvel Entertainment Group, 1989.

Brandy: *I can't figure you. Parading around like a hero, yet ready to bolt when things get complicated.... You think you're the big romantic solitary man, the lone wolf all alone in the world.... So stay with us. Help us. Because you don't want to.* (*Daredevil* 272: 18, panel 2; 19, panel 4)

Brandy's highly opinionated character may not always have chimed with the majority male readership in the comic at the time. For Nocenti, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the comics community was perceived as a 'masculine space' (Orme 2016: 403) and Nocenti's material, intentionally or otherwise, is being addressed to a majority male audience. Perhaps this is why, increasingly, Brandy's feminism is deliberately tempered.

Brandy: *You're a disgrace to women! Haven't you heard of feminism?*
 Number Nine: *No but it sounds awful.* (*Daredevil* 273, 6, panel 2)
 Brandy: *I'm always yelling and criticising and telling everyone what's wrong with them.* (*Daredevil* 278, 8, panel 2)

By the late 1980s, the mainstream was increasingly adopting some feminist concerns (Budgeon 2011; Genz and Brabon 2018), but feminists experienced open hostility from an increasingly conservative and Republican mainstream, and feminism was considered a 'dirty word' (Whittier 1995: 195). This is the context into which Nocenti presents her confident, driven feminist. Nocenti would have been conscious that women who are 'too abrasive and aggressive' or 'too different' are regarded as being 'unsuccessful women' (Olsson 2000: 297) who are not following culture's ideas of what a woman should be. In fact, Brandy's fate in the comic is quite disturbing. In a mystical storyline where the characters visit Hell, Brandy is not just killed but annihilated by Mephisto, a character who represents the devil: a seemingly damning indictment on the consequences of a woman who is fervent, outspoken and striving for independence.

However, before this, Nocenti allows one final subversive triumph for Brandy. Towards the end of the storyline in Hell, Brandy meets a beefcake angel, dressed in white underwear and a tight-fitting vest, a parody of comics' male gaze. In a reversal of Sleeping Beauty she awakens him and the angel, to her surprise, responds very affectionately towards her. Brandy's ambivalence to this reflects both her strongly held values and a willingness to take a lover through her own agency.

Pope: *Kiss him.... Like Sleeping Beauty.*

Brandy: *I'm no princess. Besides I hate those children's myths. They ruin girls.*

Pope: *But this is backwards. For once the girl gets to save the boy! (Daredevil 280: 24, panel 6; 25, panels 1 and 2)*

Number Nine: Gaining Freedom

When Nocenti first introduces Brandy Ash, her goal is to disrupt her father's plans for genetically modified meat, unaware that her father is not only genetically modifying animals but also women. One woman being experimented upon is Number Nine. The character is never given a real name nor much of a back story; instead her namelessness reflects her role as a cipher for a hegemonic man's idea of an idealised woman, one without her own identity and effectively ornamental (Whitehead et al. 2013). For reasons Nocenti never explains, Nine has become involved in a process where

she has submitted herself – or been coerced – into being modified to be “perfect”, at least in the eyes of the man who is providing the resources to do so. Perhaps, prior to transformation, Nine was conscious of the value of a woman's physical beauty in a male dominated contemporary society. Frost (2001) identified that beauty has a transactional quality that heightens a woman's value:

Wearing glasses, not being thin, not having the perfect arrangement or size of features, will all reduce the status, the 'worth' of bodies, particularly women's bodies, on which their life-chances depend (43).

Whilst Nine's appearance may give her success in the world of powerful, moneyed men like Skip Ash, it is anathema to his daughter:

Brandy: *Your stupid perfect face and perfect Barbie Doll everything could use some scars.... Give you some desperately needed character. (Daredevil 274: 8, panels 3 and 4)*

By being white and blonde, Nocenti not only stereotypes Nine but makes her representative of middle-class American ideals. After all, to maintain beauty requires, time, effort and financial resources and therefore is limited to the privileged (Romero, 2018). Being located within this privilege, and in a self-healing body, allows Nine a greater chance of permanent success in early 90s America, where this kind of surface femininity is valued.

Nocenti indicates that Nine's beauty is complemented by a programming that makes her subservient. Olsson (2000) comments that feminine stereotypes 'include beliefs that women are “born to serve” and so will make the tea' (p 300). In her early appearances, Nocenti reveals in Nine functionalist housewife traits. The character is obsessed with cooking, especially for Daredevil and other male guests, who then reciprocate by fawning over her. As Nine says herself:

Number Nine: *I feel like cooking and cleaning and serving but Brandy won't let me. She says that's just sexist programming I must resist. (Daredevil 275: 11, panel 3)*

However, despite her initial appearances as the kind of character who might be window dressing, Nocenti from the outset makes her much more complex. As one of the scientists notes to Skip:

Scientist: *It is the perfect wife we're designing for you. This model would only be trouble. She cooks, cleans, is obedient and of complete ethical character... yet is independent, reckless, fiery, impulsive.* (*Daredevil* 271: 18, panel 2)

Nocenti outlines a complexity to women that goes far beyond outward appearance and being able to fulfil functional roles. It is this that she begins to emphasise more and more as Number Nine gains enlightenment from Brandy and other characters as the story progresses. At one point, Hank Pym's robot adversary, Ultron turns up and takes her literally up a hill in order to set her on a pedestal. In this situation, Nine rebels against Skip's programming:

Number Nine: *What good is it to be a treasure if you must be guarded?... What is the point of being a perfect treasured jewel if it keeps you from freedom? I want the opposite, to be seen as just an average, flawed girl. I want to be liberated from talk of precious perfection. Accept me as flawed.* (*Daredevil* 276: 13, panels 1 and 2; 14 panel 1, see **Figure 3**)

Towards the end of Nine's narrative, where she, like Brandy, ends up in Hell, she begins to find peace with herself through engagement with a bespectacled and scrawny male angel called Lucy, who tells us that he likes her because 'she's insecure and clumsy' (*Daredevil* 281). Lucy is not just another male angel pursuing her for his own pleasure and, presented without genitalia, the threat of the male here is effectively neutralised. Nocenti shows that Lucy's ability to recognise Nine's inner traits and not her outward appearance both leads Nine to accept his friendship and to finally resolve to pursue her own aims and not those of the men surrounding her.



Figure 3: Nocenti, A. (w), Romita Jr., J. (a) and Williamson, A. (i). The Hundred Heads of Ultron. *Daredevil* #276. New York. © Marvel Entertainment Group, 1989.

Conclusion

This survey of the use of four female characters in Ann Nocenti's run in *Daredevil* in the late 1980s demonstrates a progression about increasingly integrating feminist ideas to challenge archetypal notions of female roles in 20th century America. From the pre-feminist era girlfriend, ambivalently reliant on her male partner, to the subversive, fierce and violent antagonist, who is feared by men. From the exasperated

feminist not being taken seriously to the Barbie doll icon who wants to be valued for more than her beauty. In the superhero genre, Nocenti has followed other female writers, such as Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing, who have used the fantastic to explore new ways of thinking and use magical tropes to question cultural norms and challenge existing powers (Lacey 2014). She has done so in, perhaps, the more unusual context of the comic book.

Whilst Suzanne Scott (2013) argues that women operating in male-dominated subcultures are under pressure to be 'one of the boys' and thus opportunities to explore femininity and rounded female characters are limited, the narratives in these comics explicitly inform a male-oriented readership about the diverse experiences of female characters. Nocenti's boldness in confronting archetypes may be less well understood today. Whilst Jung's ideas today may be dismissed or taken less seriously (Gray 2018), Damaris Wehr's work may have been particularly relevant to Nocenti's writing as Wehr's critique was published contemporaneously to Nocenti's run on *Daredevil*. As such, Nocenti was explicitly developing ideas in the comic which were live in sociological academic thought at the time.

Nocenti's achievement in explicitly integrating second wave feminism into *Daredevil* may be partially down to the paucity of opportunities open to her regarding female superheroes. A good comparison may be with one of the few female-led Marvel titles at the time, the *Sensational She-Hulk*. Whilst acclaimed for its humour and playing with fourth-wall conventions, *She-Hulk*, primarily written by male writers, navigated an uncomfortable line between parodying and colluding with the male gaze, her heroism taking second place to the character's reduction as a pin-up (McDaniel, 2009).

Writing in the twilight years of second-wave feminism and before third-wave feminist concerns had really taken route, Nocenti would have been aware of how feminism was fracturing (Genz & Brabon 2018). Whilst young women were still likely to support feminist goals at the time, they were more reluctant to identify as feminists, due to negative connotations around it being adversarial and monolithic (McDaniel 2009; Whittier 1995). As such, it is clear Nocenti was careful about how she developed feminist ideas in the comic, especially, as has been argued here, in


relation to her most explicitly feminist character, Brandy Ash. Like Nocenti's run on *Daredevil*, *She-Hulk* would make asides to feminism, but these were delivered in a tongue-in-cheek manner that perhaps dulled their impact. Both books reveal that, despite cultural changes at the time, discussing feminism unapologetically was still difficult in mainstream comic books in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of stronger female heroes within comics by the 1980s gave some indication as to how feminism was making progress and influencing how comics were changing (Race 2013), though it would still be decades before Marvel paid more than lip service to female led titles like the *Sensational She-Hulk* in terms of both their central characters and creators. In recent years, demands for better representation has led Marvel to create a more diverse range of titles, featuring female lead characters more often than not written by female creators (Kent 2015). As Nocenti herself says:

Kelly Sue [deConnick] and G. Willow Wilson – who are on the forefront of making a safe space for women to enter comics because obviously we've had a lot of problems with misogyny. (Nocenti, interviewed by Chapman 2018)

G. Willow Wilson's recent reimagining of Ms Marvel as a young Pakistani-American, Kamala Khan, was largely received favourably by both critics and readers (Kent 2015). Kamala's ability to stretch and flex her own body into different shapes and sizes appears now in direct contrast with oppressive ideas about the female body in Marvel comics in previous decades (Gibbons 2017). However, 30 years prior to that, and with a readership dominated by males and in a book that revolved around an archetypal male hero, Ann Nocenti dared to challenge simplistic views of female characters and open up a wider narrative about feminist concerns. At the time, that was a significant achievement.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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